

The Visit of Lafayette

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THE VISIT OF LAFAYETTE

The Old Housekeeper's Story

BY

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BOSTON

LEE AND SHEPARD

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THE VISIT OF LAFAYETTE.

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The portrait of General Lafayette, from which this picture was photographed, is in the Lee Memorial Chapel of the Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and by the kind permission of Dr. Denny, President of the University, we are permitted to use it for our frontispiece. This and a very fine portrait of General Washington were presented to the University by General George Washington Custis Lee, the eldest son of General Robert E. Lee, and they were inherited by him from his grandfather, who was the grandson of Martha Washington. This picture was painted for General Washington and probably presented to him by General Lafayette. The artist was Charles Wilson Peale, the father of Rembrandt Peale, and usually known as the Elder Peale.



THIS picture of General Lafayette was copied from one of a pair of medallions, etchings on the back of a pair of long white kid gloves. The gloves were won from General Lafayette by Miss Eliza Roane on a horserace at Fairfield, near Richmond, Virginia, in 1824. Miss Roane was afterward Mrs. Albert G. Ruffin, and her second husband was Governor McDonald, of Georgia.

Miss Eliza McDonald Ruffin, of Albemarle County, Virginia, is now the possessor of these gloves, and it is to her kindness that I owe the above picture. Miss Ruffin is a great-great-granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson, and it was at his home, Monticello, in Albemarle County, that Lafayette paid his famous visit to Jefferson.

The Visit of Lafayette

WELL have I known the old house in New Hampshire where the house-keeper's story was told; where President Monroe visited in July, 1817, and General Lafayette in June, 1825. A great, square, colonial house, standing high on terraces, roses and honeysuckle climbing up the pillars of its porch. An ideal New England home, with its large, sunny rooms and long hall opening upon the garden.

Here the housekeeper, who lived to be ninety-five years old, had spent the greater part of her life, and for three generations the children of the family had loved to listen to her stories. They were usually told winter evenings, in the larger and pleasanter of the great kitchens where she ruled supreme, — and a good rule the children thought it, for no one could make such sweets and pasties, and no child who had been familiar with the quaint old cupboard under the stairs could ever forget its mingled fragrance of pound-cake, gingerbread, and crullers.

The favorite story was always “The Visit of Lafayette,” and the children loved to hear

about the great supper, and of the huge plum-cake, which was so large that it had taken two whole days to bake, and how when Plato Waldron, the old colored servant, or Plate, as he was called, had proudly carried it in, Lafayette turned to his hostess and said, "Madame, I presume that cake was made in my honor; therefore I will take a piece." And then would come accounts of the procession, and of the "thirty young gentlemen from fifteen to twenty years of age, in uniform dress, and mounted, who added much to the interest of the scene." And the stories she had heard about the great banquet in the town hall, and of the toasts, of which

there were sixteen, for after the thirteen customary toasts in honor of the thirteen original States, three additional ones were given : the first by George Washington Lafayette, the second by the Secretary of General Lafayette, Monsieur Levasseur, and the third by S. Mitchell, Esq., which the children thought the best of all :

“The Major-Generals of our Revolutionary Army, the chief columns that sustained Liberty’s Temple throughout the war of Independence ; Rest to the fallen ; Health to Lafayette, the last chief column standing.”

The Visit of Lafayette

WHEN the old housekeeper was sitting,
Winter evenings by the fire,
Rocking and nodding o'er her knitting,
Whilst the great oak logs blazed higher,

As though trying to drive from its place
The gleam of the candle-light mild,
Which softly fell on the thoughtful face
Of a beautiful dark-eyed child ;

And when the tall clock, ticking, ticking,
Would seem trying to do its best
To keep time with the needles' clicking,
There came ever the same request :

“ Tell me the story, oh, dear Dame Dean !
That I love and will ne'er forget,
About the wonderful things you've seen,
And the visit of Lafayette.”

Then the child drew her chair still nearer,
While the Dame gazed long in the blaze,
As if to find there for her hearer
All the splendors of other days.

.. Little Mary, the great doings then !
The like we shall never more see,
For those good times cannot come again,
But their mem'ry's ever with me.

By bells and by cannon that morning
We were wakened long before light,
And eagerly watched for the dawning
Which brought the day clear, warm, and
bright.

At six o'clock they began to come,
People gath'ring from far and near,
Till we scarcely knew our quiet home :
I've heard full ten thousand were here.

There were some who'd walked twelve miles
or more,
But they heeded not tired feet,
For they gladly would have walked a score,
Their hero to see and to greet.

From rich and poor alike came flowers,
And each one lent a helping hand,
Till the whole house was filled with bowers —
One wandered through a fairyland.

Lafayette's room was ready for days,
The great room with canopied bed, —
Where evenings your Aunt often stays,
And her portrait hangs overhead.

His son's room the west chamber we call,
It looked on the garden and pond.
With landscapes painted over the wall;
Then rooms for their suite were beyond.

At ten o'clock came sounds of cheering,
With music and drum's martial beat;
I knew the procession was nearing,
And hastened out into the street.

There were carts with flags and flowers
wound,
Drawn by oxen with ribbons bright,
That came for miles from the country round
Bringing pretty girls dressed in white.

The bells in the steeples were ringing,
And everywhere one was met
By bands of children gayly singing,
‘Welcome ! Welcome to Lafayette !’

The windows and porches were crowded,
The joy of the day never waned,
Its happiness was not once clouded ;
Devotion and gratitude reigned.

Our flag and the French flag were entwined
All across the triumphal arch,
And banners, mottoes, and emblems lined
The way along which they would march.

Then soon I saw the epaulets shine
On the handsome uniforms new,
Of the artillery down the line,
And the Strafford Guards were in view.

A finer company I've ne'er known,
And the Marshal riding ahead,
Then all gallantly marching as one,
Came the Rockingham Guards well led.

The bands played 'Welcome to Lafayette,'
It was a stirring martial air,
To a good old tune it had been set.
And one heard it everywhere.

I'd hoped he'd wear his uniform best,
Like a Marquis and General grand ;
But instead he was quite plainly dressed,
And carried his hat in his hand,

Waving it right and left while they cheered.
I, too, cheered as well as I could,
And saw as soon as his carriage neared,
That he looked most kindly and good.

I saw him well in spite of the throng ;
In an open barouche he rode,
And as he bowed at the cheering long,
It seemed little his years he showed.

Yet it made me marvel when I thought
Of the stories I'd heard and read,
That told how he'd suffered, marched, and
fought,
And of the Olmütz prison dread.

How often still in my dreams at night
The song of the children I hear,
With sound of the bugles clear and light,
And the voices of people near!

'It's a proud time for our Granite State,'
I could hear an old neighbor say,
'And I shall not know at any rate
Another such glorious day.

‘His Secretary, Levasseur, ’s there —
I mean that man comely and slight ;
He’ll win the hearts of the ladies fair ;
And who’s that on the General’s right ?’

‘George Washington Lafayette, his son,
God bless him ! for he’s been well named,’
And I was turning to see which one,
When a woman next me exclaimed,

‘There’s my man John, the first of those
four,
And doesn’t he look brave and fine !
Marching just as when the flag he bore
At the battle of Brandywine !

‘He has good courage! Yes, there they go,’
And I saw a battle flag borne
By a little old man, white as snow,
His army coat faded and worn.

Then came splendidly mounted young men,
Many citizens carriages brought,
And soldiers, proud to see him again —
Their General with whom they once fought!

But, ah! I knew it was growing late,
That to hasten home would be right,
And I’d the promise of helping wait
At the supper party that night.

To leave was harder than words can tell,
I was young then and lively, too,
My pink frock I knew became me well,
And the sights were not yet half through.

Lafayette was expected at three,
And all was in readiness then ;
At six o'clock was served a grand tea,
But supper was not until ten.

A stately picture our Madam made ;
We thought none with her could compare
In her lilac and silver brocade,
And lace cap on her dark brown hair.

Then there were the beauties, the cousins,
Miss Mollie could sing like a bird,
Miss Polly had suitors by dozens,
The toast of the County, I've heard.

Miss Rachel, whether sad or merry,
A sweeter voice I never hear,
And Miss Jeannette with laugh so cheery —
They're silent now this many a year.

And then Miss Hetty, with winning charm,
Came fresh as a morning in May,
A basket of flowers on her arm,
And looking so joyous and gay.

In her gown of white, and strings of pearls
That fastened her girdle of blue,
And held the comb in her shining curls,
She was truly pretty to view.

Then quite demurely she showed us how
She had learned a bit of a speech,
To make with a courtesy deep and low,
And a nosegay ready for each.

'Tis a custom still you know ne'er fails,
And not only on days of state,
But there never was guest of Squire Hale's
That had ever been known to wait ;

The whole of the household, high and low,
Would be gathered about the door,
And they made a pleasant, goodly show ;
Alas, then there were many more !

There were bright eyes that sparkled and
danced,
Soft cheeks that, like roses, were red ;
And 'twas not at the flowers he glanced,
When the General smilingly said :

‘ I have entered a land of roses ! ’
But your little Aunt did not speak,
And blushed and looked down at her posies,
Not as bright as those in her cheek.

As soon as the twilight was ended,
With lights the whole town was ablaze,
Countless torches and fireworks splendid,
While the bands played · The Marseillaise.'

And the crowd grew ever greater yet,
Till their cheering the echoes woke,
For a speech or word from Lafayette,
But he turned to his host and spoke :

‘ Will you thank them for their welcome,
Sir ? ’

Then he said with his pleasant smile,
‘ Truly, kinder hearts there never were !
Yet I needs must rest for a while.’

And with speeches and crowds for weeks past,
Journeys to tire the strongest men,
Is it strange he was weary at last?
He was near three-score years and ten.

But at supper once more he seemed young,
And e'en now I love to recall
How then, as he moved the guests among,
He'd a kind, thoughtful word for all.

In truth, I've heard he was always so,
And had nice pleasing things to say,
That helped to gladden the world, although,
Perhaps, 'twas his pretty French way.

Miss Rachel was the evening's queen,
The wonder of all the grand folk,
With her Lafayette was often seen,
And in French together they spoke.

She'd a voice like the sweetest singer,
And though I could not understand,
Yet I could not forbear to linger,
For it seemed like some foreign land.

Two hundred guests were asked to the feast,
Which indeed was a banquet fine,
And although my part had been the least,
I thought all the glory was mine.

Many had over ten miles to ride,
But came in good cheer none the less,
Whilst the ladies with each other vied
In the elegance of their dress.

There were high, carved combs on ringlets
set,

Rare old laces and satin gowns,
For the beauty and fashion were met
From our own and adjacent towns.

And they shone in the soft, glowing light,
For a myriad candles burned ;
A great company gathered that night,
But all eyes to Lafayette turned.

Among those who'd come to the meeting
Were old soldiers loyal and brave,
And there ne'er was more heartfelt greeting
Than their General to each one gave.

One could see stern faces grow brighter,
Once more in his presence rejoice,
As though age and care became lighter
At the sound of their hero's voice.

The next day when about to depart,
And when for farewell all were met,
Lafayette's kind way won ev'ry heart,
His words one could never forget ;

Then over our Madam's hand, quite low
He with courtly grace bowed his head,
And they were just preparing to go,
When ' But where's Levasseur ? ' he said.

It was not for me to be talking,
And no more did I care to say ;
With Miss Hetty I'd seen him walking,
Turning down the long garden way ;

I saw them pause where the pansies grew,
I could see the red rose she wore,
As he stooped down to gather a few,
And then they strolled on as before.

Yet at the last I was sent to look,
When they'd called and he was not found :
They may have thought that some time it
 took,
For I chose the longest way round.

Down through the lilies and purple phlox,
Where to-day the apple boughs bend,
And through the alley of hollyhocks,
To the myrtle walk at the end.

But I forget, you never have seen
The garden that I always knew,
Fit for the garden of any queen,
Till the new street cut its way through.

With arbors, and pond, and chestnut trees,
The honeysuckles loved so well
By the humming-birds and honey-bees,
And the hedge where the robins dwell.

No flowers can equal, to my mind,
Those old-fashioned fav'rites now rare,
And e'en late in the fall one could find
Some blossoms still lingering there.

They were resting on the pleasant seat
'Neath the great spreading linden tree,
Where good James Dean and I used to meet,
Just where I had thought they would be.

But soon as I heard their laughter gay
And saw them so truly content,
I quite forgot what I came to say
And wished I had never been sent.

Miss Hetty ne'er looked fairer to me,
In her frock with white satin bows,
Yet one thing I could not help but see,
'Twas he who was wearing the rose.

And now, good-night ; there's no more to
hear,"

The Dame laid her work in her lap,
Then said : " Go ask your Aunt Hetty, dear,"
As she closed her eyes for a nap.

“Go ask your Aunty,” again she said,
But the housekeeper was alone,
Her listener had already fled
And up the winding stairway gone,

Through the long corridor was flitting
Like a small phantom in the gloom,
To where she knew her Aunt was sitting
In the great, silent, lonely room.

To her it was not silent or sad,
For voices the child did not know
Came each with its echo, faint yet glad,
Sent back from the years long ago.

In the shadows were happy faces,
In the fire-light memories dear,
And bright forms came to find loved places —
She was never alone when here.

“Aunty, do you think Dame Dean quite
knows?

Were you ever so gay and fair?
Did the Frenchman really wear the rose?
Had you pearls in your gown and hair?”

“Yes, dear, the story must be the truth,”
And then she glanced up at the face
In the portrait of her radiant youth,
With its charm of beauty and grace,

Whose glad eyes met the eyes that had wept ;
But the child did not heed the glance.
“ Do you think the rose he always kept
And carried it with him to France ?

In some French book has it long been pressed,
Some quaint book with curious name,
And nobody there has ever guessed
Its story, or knows why it came ?

Or dreams that in such a far-off land,
It once bloomed with the roses red ? ”
And the child stooped down and kissed her
 hand,
But the little Aunt nothing said,

For her thoughts had wandered far away,
And she smiled, but was silent yet ;
They had gone to find that happy day
With the visit of Lafayette.

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